Public relations and propaganda in framing the Iraq war: a preliminary review

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Abstract

Techniques of public relations and propaganda were an essential part of the 2003 war in Iraq. The government framed the issues, story line, and slogans to serve its purposes. Embedding journalists, staging showy briefings, emphasizing visual and electronic media, and making good television out of it were all important to fighting the war.

Propaganda of all shades was evident, and the trend toward deception in the future is likely to continue, since the current administration succeeded to such a large extent with its own electorate. But while it seemed to win the public relations war at home, it probably lost it abroad. All strategies at the White House and Pentagon seem designed for more public relations and propaganda in future wars. The government will have to keep wars short, at least somewhat clean, and to give the impression at least of some transparency, lest the public will to fight withers, as it did in Vietnam.

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1. Introduction

In 1991, Public Relations Review published an assessment of U.S. military public relations in the Persian Gulf War. The article was subsequently reproduced in a book, published in another journal, and quoted, reprinted, and used frequently in various military public information courses. That article predicted that public relations and public communications would play an increasingly significant role in warfare, that the battle for public opinion would be as important as the engagement of soldiers on the front. The examination of the importance of public relations to warfare led to the prediction that, because of expanding communication technologies, wars would be more transparent, and thus cleaner, shorter, and faster.1

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A preliminary review of communication tactics in the recent war in Iraq confirms the accuracy of those 1991 predictions. In fact, U.S. military officials have frequently used the term "media war" to describe the 2003 campaign to oust Saddam Hussein and bring about regime change in that war-torn and beleaguered nation.

In his new book, *The New Face of War: How War Will Be Fought in the 21st Century*, Bruce Berkowitz writes: "Today the ability to collect, communicate, process and protect information is the most important factor defining military power." He maintains that it is more important than armor, firepower, or mobility.  

The differences between public relations and other public communication need to be explained here for the purposes of this article. Both are usually efforts to shape opinion and influence behavior. The term "public relations" implies a relationship, a mutuality, a duality, between message sender and receiver, a two-way process that achieves at least some degree of dialogue. Implicit in effective public relations is a transparency that allows third-party objective scrutiny, thereby gaining credibility, the basis of its power.

"Public communication," on the other hand, is more often one-way. It is unrealistic to assume, as some have done, that dialogue, symmetry, and transparency should always be the purposes of public communication. Much public communication by governments is propaganda (literally, the sowing of seeds), usually without concern for dialogue or sufficient transparency to allow objective third-party scrutiny (except after the fact). World War II scholars labeled truthful propaganda as "white propaganda," while lies, deceit, and disinformation were called "black propaganda." Most propaganda is probably partly true and falls into a gray area.

For the war in Iraq, the U.S. government engaged in public relations activities but also in all forms of propaganda—white, black, and gray. The purpose of this article is to examine those efforts for historical purposes and to provide guidance for future developments.

### 2. Framing the issues

Cognitive scientists have found that the human brain works with frames and metaphors. Frames are in the synapses of our brains, in our neural circuitry. We don't think about facts; the mind switches to the way those facts are framed. Thus, framing the issue becomes all powerful in influencing our thought about it.

"Frames once entrenched are hard to dispel," writes George Lakoff, a professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. He has identified some of the basic metaphors used by the U.S. military to frame the issues of American foreign policy in the Iraq War. One is to frame a nation as a person to justify a war against his or her people. In the case of Iraq, the person was Saddam Hussein. That individual becomes demonized in all the government's references. (The demonization of Hitler, Stalin, Castro, Ho Chi Minh, and Milosevic come to mind.)

When the French refused to join the U.S. and U.K. in the Iraq conflict, the government briefly demonized French President Jacques Chirac, and some Americans quickly came to loathe the French (French fries became freedom fries, etc.). "The metaphor becomes part of an elaborate system," writes Lakoff, "in which there are friendly nations, hostile nations, rogue states, and so forth."
2.1. Stories of the metaphor

In the “nation as person” metaphor, Lakoff identifies two narratives with a classic fairy-tale structure: the “self-defense story” and the “rescue story.” The story always has a hero, a crime, and a villain. The villain is inherently evil and irrational. If the hero can’t reason with the irrational villain, he has to defeat him.\(^5\)

The self-defense story worked in the Persian Gulf War. The first George Bush claimed that Saddam was threatening our oil supply, our way of life. Then the “rape of Kuwait,” partly engineered by Hill & Knowlton,\(^6\) led to the rescue story, a more powerful metaphor. Both stories also worked for his son in the Iraq war. The self-defense story focused on Saddam’s connection to Al Qaeda and terrorism, or the oft-proclaimed Weapons of Mass Destruction. The rescue story focused on saving the Iraqi people and bringing democracy to the region.

As the war progressed and Weapons of Mass Destruction were not immediately found, the story line shifted from defense to emphasize rescue. The briefings at Central Command were used day after day during the fighting to report abuses by Saddam and his government. One theme was that Saddam’s militias wore civilian clothes to ambush U.S. soldiers. Another was that the Iraq army was shooting civilians and terrorizing Iraqis to fight against their will.

2.2. Catch-phrases of the metaphor

Because the message was meant for a world audience, the U.S. government’s language sometimes ran into a cross-cultural buzz saw. The first mistake was when Bush used the term “crusade” in his post 9/11 speech in which he vowed to avenge the acts of terrorism and issued a warning to the “axis of evil.”

Much buzz swirled around naming the action against Saddam Hussein before the White House finally settled on “Operation Enduring Freedom,” but aside from its use in the nightly news, the name didn’t really catch on as did “Desert Storm” in the Gulf War. What to call the nations pursuing the war was also puzzling, especially when it might have been just a U.S. or a U.S.–U.K. campaign, but when other small nations signed on, the allies became the “Coalition of the Willing.”

When Iraqi resistance stiffened after the first few days of invasion, the military briefers continually blamed “Saddam’s Fedayeen.” A few days later, however, they stopped using “Fedayeen” because they learned in Arabic it means one who sacrifices himself for a cause, a positive connotation. So they started calling the Iraqis who put up a fight against the invading forces “paramilitaries,” and then changed that to “terror-like death squads.”

These are the ways in which the American government framed the issues for the public and the news media. In America, with little political opposition or countervailing stories in the press, the Administration’s metaphor dominated, and public support for the war prevailed. In the rest of the world, most people saw much disconnect between the American version and the reality they were presented with, and the vast majority remained opposed. We can conclude at this point at least that the U.S. government won the public relations war at home but probably lost it abroad (see Section 5).
3. Propaganda

The U.S. government succeeded with its propaganda in America, according to Garth Jowett, because "Americans tend to think that propaganda is used only by other countries." Jowett, a professor of communications at the University of Houston, is author of Propaganda and Persuasion. He maintains that the U.S. propagandizes as much as any country, and that running any modern administration requires "routine manipulation and spin—the basic tools of propaganda."8

Early in the Bush II administration, the Defense Department issued a secret directive to the military to establish an Office of Strategic Influence to conduct covert operations aimed at influencing public opinion and policy makers world-wide. When the plan was leaked, a howl of public protest caused the plan to be scrapped, publicly at least, but Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said this effort would have to be carried out anyway, even if under another name.

The Defense Department operates a National Defense University at Fort McNair in Washington, with an Information Department and professors of psychological operations, or information warfare also known as psyops. Members of the faculty often maintain that the most effective psyops is the truth. But the message sometimes veered away in the 2003 war in Iraq.

3.1. Black propaganda

Both the U.S. and U.K. governments engaged in some forms of black propaganda in the Iraq War, although usually in ways that allowed the blame to be placed on nameless underlings if the truth about the lies and deception were to become public. The clearest case in point was the story line of defense against villain's threat to use the ultimate Weapon of Mass Destruction, nuclear warheads. Investigative reporter Seymour Hersh wrote that the two superpowers resorted to fabrications about Iraq's nuclear power program when it became obvious that they were losing the battle for international public opinion.9

The British propaganda effort was spearheaded by its Information Operations, "I/Ops," ultimately working through British and American intelligence agents who have never been named. Faked and forged documents alleged a transfer of uranium from Niger to Iraq. In Hersh's words, "one member of the U.N. inspection team who supported the American and British position arranged for dozens of unverified and unverifiable intelligence reports and tips—data known as inexecutable intelligence—to be funneled to M16 operatives and quietly passed along to newspapers in London and elsewhere."10

Hersh claimed the C.I.A. knew the documents were fraudulent but thought it would be "great" if the Secretary of State knew about them. Colin Powell's speech to the U.N. was based partly on this evidence. Hersh quoted an unnamed State Department official who said that Powell never saw the actual documents, but was "absolutely apoplectic about it" after the fact.11 Hersh quotes a "former high-level intelligence official" as saying that "Somebody deliberately let something false get in there. It could not have gotten into the system without the agency being involved. Therefore, it was an internal intention. Someone set someone up."12

On March 14, as the "Coalition" was preparing for the final showdown, Senator Jay Rockefeller (R-WVa), asked the F.B.I. to investigate. "There is a possibility," he wrote to F.B.I.
director Robert Mueller, "that the fabrication of these documents may be part of a larger deception campaign aimed at manipulating public opinion and foreign policy regarding Iraq."\textsuperscript{13}

As the story fell apart, it was nameless individuals down the line who were blamed for it. Senior Defense Department policy advisors held an unusual hearing in June to rebut Congressional criticism that they had politicized intelligence to justify the war. But one unnamed official admitted, "There was a lot of double-speak out there."\textsuperscript{14}

The Weapons of Mass Destruction story line, nuclear, chemical, and biological, probably worked in the U.S. because mainstream mass media raised few questions about it, even though media in most of the rest of the world remained highly skeptical. Adrienne Aron, a Berkeley psychologist, points out that the ultimate success of propaganda techniques depends on whether the information target has other sources that counter the propaganda.\textsuperscript{15}

When the weapons weren't immediately found, the rescue story line was emphasized. Several days into the fighting, British Prime Minister Tony Blair "turned up the propaganda war" when he claimed that two British soldiers, whose bodies were shown on Al Jazeera television, were executed by the Iraqis. At a Camp David press conference with Bush, Blair said: "We've seen the reality of Saddam's regime: his thugs prepared to kill their own people, the parading of prisoners of war, and now the release of those pictures of executed British soldiers." The Iraqis denied the charge, saying Blair had "lied to the public," adding, "We haven't executed anyone."\textsuperscript{16}

After the captured American soldier Jessica Lynch was hospitalized by the Iraqis, they offered to free her. But news of this Iraq humanity and magnanimity would have damaged the rescue story line. So the American military needlessly staged a "daring raid" on the hospital, and only this "rescue" made the mainstream media, until much after the real facts no longer had any impact.\textsuperscript{17}

3.2. Propaganda from the sky

In the United States, we don't want to get messages directly from the Government; we've traditionally wanted only privately-owned media to tell us what the government is doing. But outside America, the U.S. government feels free to take its message directly to foreign populations. As it had done in the Gulf War, the U.S. and U.K. governments rained down from the air tens of millions of Arabic language leaflets urging the Iraqis to abandon Saddam Hussein, or to lay down their arms, or telling them how to surrender, or where to tune into radio broadcasts from America.

On the battlefield outside Basra, U.S. psychological operations teams used loudspeakers on top of Humvees to send a different kind of message. The loudspeakers beamed the thunderous recorded sound of British challenger tanks to startle the Iraqis into surrendering. "We want to keep them off-balance, or keep them up all night wondering," a special operations soldier told The Washington Post.\textsuperscript{18}

Rumsfeld himself tried to speak directly to the Iraqi people ("You will have a place in free Iraq if you do the right thing . . .") It was translated into Arabic and broadcast on Iraqi radio frequencies from Commando Solo, a modified C-130 cargo plane flying over the country. That kind of broadcasting, usurping Iraq's own airwaves from the air, was used until the port city of Qasr was captured. The military almost immediately took over local radio and started the Iraq Media
Network, sending out a mix of pop music, promotional messages, and the government’s version of the news. Television was added quickly with five hours of programming each evening.

The American-British messages were not always strong enough to overcome Iraq’s messages. So before U.S. and British forces could take over Baghdad, they ensured that only Coalition voices would be heard in Iraq by bombing its communication facilities. The bombs destroyed radio and television transmitters, telephone exchanges, and government media offices. Surprisingly few voices in America protested this as a violation of freedom of speech.

The day after Saddam’s government collapsed, the U.S. took over Iraqi state television, using Baghdad’s Channel 3 for Pentagon-controlled programming to persuade Iraqis “that their country is being liberated, not occupied, and that self-government and free enterprise are on the way.”19 Later that week Britain began printing 10,000 copies of Al Zamen (The Times) in Arabic.

Norman Pattiz, chairman of the Middle East committee of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the U.S. government-funded body that provides radio and TV broadcasts worldwide, said: “There is a media war going on in the [Middle East] region. We need to engage in that war and present balance in a region that is highly emotional, highly charged. The images they are seeing are not the same images we are seeing.”20

3.3. Propaganda on the Internet

The Gulf War in 1991 has been called the cable-TV war that brought CNN to world attention. The Vietnam War was called the first television war. World War II was basically a radio war. World War I was termed the first propaganda war. The Crimean War in the late 19th century was the first war covered by independent reporters on the battlefield.

The 2003 Iraq War perhaps was the first-ever Internet war. “With more than half a billion people worldwide connected to the Internet,” wrote the Financial Times (London), “a second Gulf war could be a chance for the web to take a star turn.”21 In March just before the war, CNN launched the Internet’s first all-news streaming radio station for news about the war. CBS and MSNBC increased their online video coverage. ABC created the Internet’s first live video news channel to cover the war. And every major newspaper added special war coverage to their web sites.

The Internet may also have fueled an enormous anti-war effort. The Financial Times wrote that “for the first time since the Internet was adopted in the late 1990s, its power is being concentrated on an international war. The result is almost impossible to catalogue; tens or even hundreds of thousands of weblogs—known as blogs—have been established or adapted to chronicle or comment upon the conflict. An audience of hundreds of millions surfs between them.”22 While most observers felt that the government had been able to co-opt the major mass media, the Internet seemed to become the last refuge for those who wanted a different set of facts, point of view, or critical perspective.

The New York Times reported that, as bombs were falling in Baghdad, cell phones were ringing in China about where to stage an anti-war protest. In Cairo, activists used the Internet to summon demonstrators to a central square. In San Francisco, “technophiles” were beaming live protest footage to anti-war web sites. “Throughout the world,” said the Times, “technology is allowing activists to stage spontaneous rallies in reaction to the war.”23
4. Media war

At the very outset, it became clear that the Pentagon had diligently prepared for a media war. A Washington Post headline stated the concept boldly: “Propaganda Seen as Key for Military, World Opinion.”24 Military officials had been paying careful attention to propaganda scholars, such as psychology professor Anthony Pratkanis, of the University of California at Santa Cruz. “War is fought not just with bullets and rifles and tanks, but with influence tactics and words and a communication environment,” he wrote.25 (See also book reviews.)

Military training in public relations has increased since the Gulf War. Public Relations Review in 1991 described the extent to which the Pentagon had then gone to educate its officers in public relations. That effort has grown since then; the Defense Department’s “school for public relations” has expanded significantly and relocated from Indiana to Fort Meade in Maryland, bringing it closer to the center of military headquarters. In addition, the White House Office of Global Communications has provided consistent government-wide message coordination.

4.1. Embedding

The biggest and most important public relations innovation of the Iraq War was the embedding of about 600 journalists with the troops doing the actual fighting, surprising many because it was the first time this had ever been done in the history of modern warfare. But the strategy is simply classic public relations, of the kind espoused by Ivy Lee. In the Rockefeller conflict with striking coal miners in Ludlow, Colorado in 1913, with public opinion thoroughly against the Rockefellers and other mine owners, Lee invited reporters to come inside, talk to any officials, examine any documents, and observe the conflict firsthand. That proved to be the decisive strategy, gaining Rockefeller a rare sympathetic press, although pro-labor forces continued to castigate Lee for decades as a result.26

One of the reasons for the sympathy is that such reporting tends to humanize the principals. Soldiers in the Iraq War became human beings when the press started sharing their foxholes, just as Ivy Lee engineered the humanizing of John D. Rockefeller, many decades ago, when reporters finally were given personal contact with the multi-millionaire and found him not to be the ogre that the muckrakers had depicted.

Embedding in the Iraq war raised a host of arguments and controversies among journalists, but it succeeded beyond doubt as public relations. Clark S. Judge, managing director of the White House Writers Group, says embedding “counts as the first major victory in the war in Iraq.” Judge explains that, “when a crippling public relations battle looms, the first issue is not who spins best, gets the best stories and wins the week. The issue is who becomes the standard of truth.”27

Prior to the war, with world opinion essentially sympathetic to the plight of Arabs and Muslims in general and the Iraqis in particular, Saddam’s message seemed more believable than Bush and Blair’s. “The essential strategy for becoming the standard of truth when no one believes you is to open your operations to the kind of risk that no one would take if he were planning to lie,” writes Judge. “Spin is out of the question. Good or bad, the story is there for the reporter to see. In a company criticized for, say, global labor practices, this would mean opening overseas factories to unscheduled media visits. In this war, it means embedded reporters.”28
Critics were quick to point out that embedded journalists were only telling one side of the story, since, being in the middle of only the American action, they could see only one side. Furthermore, working in close proximity with soldiers who were putting their lives on the line, the journalists were almost always in sympathy with the effort underway. A few even took up arms and joined the battle. Journalists were given some guidance about what they could and could not report, and who they could and could not talk to. But the general impression left with the public was that there was no government censorship. The public was getting the straight scoop from the battlefield, even though most of the news was soft and feature stuff.

4.2. Staging media relations

The military’s main stage for coordinating war information was in a new building erected in the Qatar desert 350 miles north of its capital, Doha, field headquarters of the U.S. Central Command (Centcom). There, daily briefings were held for the news media in an auditorium, which, according to The Washington Post, was designed with White House guidance and a Hollywood designer at a cost of $200,000. The set had five large plasma television screens to show video clips of smart bombs and precision missiles striking Iraqi military equipment and command buildings. The Post reported that little was shown of the tanks and troops in the ground war. The Post also reported that most of the uniforms in the area belonged to public affairs officers, “and their mission is image.”29

The Centcom media center did everything it could to schmooze the press, including a coffee bar that served macchiatos and lattes, and a commissary that sold souvenirs. Interpreters were contracted to translate news conferences for Arab journalists. But the Post reported that journalists tended to prefer the more modest British public affairs office at the rear of the media center “for informal briefings far richer in specifics and more time than what the U.S. military” was offering.30

4.3. Celebrity briefers

The Pentagon was fortunate to have two officials as spokesmen at center stage who became celebrities with star status. At Centcom in Qatar, Brig. Gen. Vincent K. Brooks took over the daily briefings. A ramrod tall African-American with a steady gaze, an open face, and good eye contact, he summarized the day’s information without revealing anything beyond the story line and still responded to questions without hesitation. His visage became a staple of the evening news, and worldwide coverage brought such media attention and requests for interviews that he and his family back home had to take cover or go underground.

But the big star was Defense Secretary Rumsfeld himself. Vernon Loeb, of The Washington Post, said he had “reached rock-star status during the war in Afghanistan.”31 In the Iraq war his popularity with many Americans soared even higher. His war plan was called audacious.

For a man his age (70), he exuded power and energy, striding to the podium and standing up to grueling world travel. But the real key to his strength and power might have been his ability to deal with the media. He was sometimes accompanied by his generals, sometimes by his chief of public affairs, Victoria Clarke, but he was always the one in charge. He could be sarcastic in answering a reporter’s question, but his bark was done with a twinkle in his eye.
Most important, he made himself accessible to the press. John McWethy, veteran ABC Pentagon correspondent, speaking of traveling with the indefatigable Rumsfeld, said, “You’re getting face time all the time. It isn’t always substantive or even informative, but it’s very important for what we do for a living to have at him several times a day.”

Rumsfeld did not hesitate to be critical of the press when he felt the reporting was inaccurate or conflicting. But significantly the brunt of his criticism was never aimed at embedded journalists or Pentagon correspondents. He strongly endorsed their work, saying that they allowed the American people to “see accurate representations and written accounts of what the men and women in uniform were doing.” His strongest attack was, instead, on a few “retired military officers” who had been hired by the networks to provide commentary about the war on television. They had been the quickest to decry the small invading force, predicting that it would lead to defeat.

Rumsfeld’s media success took pressure off the President, who is not particularly good at parrying reporters’ questions or articulating spontaneous responses. So answers about the war were left to the Pentagon, and White House reporters, said The New York Times, found themselves “embedded in the wrong unit.”

The Times described the White House media relations: “More often than not, the questions fired at [Ari] Fleischer are beside the point. He and the rest of the communications apparatus at the White House decide on a message of the day early in the morning. That message is repeated so implacably that reporters, especially reporters for the cable news networks in need of sound bites, end up surrendering and head out onto the lawn to parrot what they have heard.” Details about the war were left in the hands of the “professionals at the Pentagon.”

Image management at the White House was as tight as message management, said the Times. When an AP photographer took an uninvited picture through the window of the President announcing the beginning of the war in the Rose Garden, the communications office announced the next day that access for still photographers would be temporarily curtailed for that digression.

4.4. Orchestrating visual imagery

In our televised and digitized world, pictures far exceed words as powerful weapons. The U.S. military leaders acknowledged the importance of this development in modern warfare a few years ago when they established a unit called the Joint Combat Camera Program, headquartered in the Pentagon with operations at Fort Meade. In the Iraq war, Combat Camera was actively engaged on the battlefield for the first time. There, 150 Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine photographers, each carrying about 60 pounds of camera equipment and a 9 mm Beretta pistol, captured visual images of the war from the Pentagon’s perspective.

At Centcom, Combat Camera operated around the clock. Military personnel at computer stations processed 600–800 photos and 25–50 video clips from the front lines every day, of which about 80% were given to the news media. They became the images displayed on the big screens during briefings at the Pentagon and Centcom. They were also put online to news organizations and for the public, where they got an estimated 750,000 hits a day.

Within seconds of the President’s speech announcing the beginning of the war, Combat Camera put visuals on the web. Within minutes, network news programs were playing Combat
Camera’s clips of Tomahawk missiles, tinted green from a night-vision lens, firing at Iraq from Navy ships in the Persian Gulf.

The Baltimore Sun noted that “Photos of sleek fighter jets, rescued POWs, and smiling Iraqis cheering the arrival of U.S. troops are easy to find among Combat Camera’s public images. Photos of bombed-out Baghdad neighborhoods and so-called ‘collateral damage’ are not.” The officer in charge of the unit in Iraq, Lt. Jane LaRoque, told the Sun: “We’ve got a lot of good humanitarian images, showing us helping the Iraqi people and the people in Baghdad celebrating ... A lot of our imagery will have a big impact on world opinion.”

The image the U.S. perhaps most wanted to symbolize the war was the toppling of a new Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad. For this they did not need Combat Camera. The networks already had their own crews in place. Combat Camera did provide one of the other most gripping scenes of the war from the Pentagon’s perspective: a video clip of Marines carrying a 19-year-old Private Jessica Lynch on a stretcher in what seemed to be a daring night-time rescue from behind enemy lines. She quickly became a news media darling and seemed destined to reach Sergeant York status, although the raid may have been totally unnecessary.

4.5. Live from the front: the television war

While the power of visual images is unquestioned, live visuals are the penultimate. And the Iraq war provided the world’s first real-time video from the battlefield. These unprecedented images “very much changed the reporting in this war,” said Paul Slavin, executive producer of ABC’s “World News Tonight.” But most critics felt the change did not help objective reporting. Television coverage was “very much filtered through a military lens,” said Rachel Coen, a media analyst with Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting.

The message was powerful in America, where a Los Angeles Times poll indicated that 70% of Americans got most of their news from cable-TV. Nielsen data showed that the number of average daily viewers for MSNBC and CNN increased more than 300% during the war, Fox (the most viewed cable news channel) more than 288%.

Television’s power was greatly enhanced by the new video technology, primarily the development of satellite-linked videophones, small enough to set up in the field in a few minutes. An inexpensive version weighs only a few pounds and costs $8,000 or less, and it can send jerky 15-frames-a-second images that have become familiar to most TV viewers. It looks like a laptop with fold-out panels, and can provide voice, data, and video in a single signal. A more expensive version (about $100,000) weighs less than 100 pounds and still takes only a few minutes to set up, but provides a better picture.

During the Gulf War in 1991, comparable satellite/video systems required 14 refrigerator-sized boxes, each weighing 500–600 pounds, requiring two hours for set-up, and costing $400,000 and more.

4.6. Staging the victory celebration

If anyone doubted that war had become public communication, and therefore show biz, or that George Bush would cast himself as the conquering hero, the victory celebration dispelled
any question. Bush did not allow his generals to claim victory on the battlefield in Iraq. His advisors must have had a bigger performance in mind.

On May 2, in a theatrical spectacular that any movie maker would have envied, the President’s plane swooped down onto the deck of the mighty aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, returning from a long engagement in Iraq and the Persian Gulf. With the television cameras going for what would certainly be a world-wide audience as the giant warship steamed through a pre-sunset vast blue Pacific, a jaunty, healthy-looking President stepped from a plane onto the carrier’s deck in his flight suit to the cheers of thousands of sailors on board.

The cameras used a wide angle to show the whole ship, lined with its huge crew, an awesome scene. The cameras moved close up and intimate when Bush was delivering his remarks, thanking all the military for a job well-done. He was interrupted frequently by cheering. The crowd shots, wrote TV critic Tom Shales, “gave the impression that every man and woman in uniform aboard the ship was thrilled with Bush’s presence and his every spoken word.”

Fred Barnes, commenting after the speech on the Fox News Channel, seemed awed that the staged event allowed the President to dominate television for an entire day. The timing was also perfect; as soon as the President’s show was over, the networks had to switch to their regular “reality” programs because of sweeps month, leaving no time for analysis and commentary.

5. Losing the battle for world opinion

While opinion polls showed that a majority of Americans supported the government’s war in Iraq, most polls showed it was losing the war abroad. In the weeks leading up to the war, Gallup International polled people in 40 countries. Overall, less than 9% supported a U.S.-led war without U.N. approval. Polls from 27 countries showed more than 80% opposition. Only one country of the 40 showed a polling sample of less than 50% opposition.

Antiwar sentiments became synonymous with anti-Americanism. Philip Taylor, professor of international communications at the University of Leeds, England, and author of War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War, characterized the world view of the American campaign. “The attack on Iraq is a war for oil; it is a ‘crusade’ against Islam; it is unfinished Bush family business. And then there is Palestine, ‘Coca-colonialism’ and U.S. ‘McDomination.’”

Several days before Baghdad fell, Michael Dobbs, Washington Post staff writer, wrote: “Saddam Hussein is following a well thought-out strategy for extracting a political and propaganda victory from almost certain military defeat.” He quoted Kato Saadilla, Washington spokesman for the Iraqi National Front, a leading exile group: “Saddam is winning the psychological war.”

Even several months after the war was over, Dobbs wrote: “The United States is losing a propaganda war for the hearts and minds of millions of Arabs.” He was reporting on a survey conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project. “We’ve gone from bad to worse over the past year,” said Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center. This downward trend, wrote Dobbs, “comes despite an intensive U.S. public diplomacy campaign designed to counter Al Qaeda propaganda and promote U.S. policies to an increasingly skeptical global audience.”
6. Conclusion

It goes without saying that the techniques of public relations and propaganda described here will continue to be part of every war in the near future; or until new technologies change the formula. The government will frame the issues, story line, slogans and catch phrases to serve its purposes. Only an independent, alert, and responsible press, together with a concerned citizenry, can force the government to be more honest and forthright.

Embedding journalists, staging showy briefings, emphasizing visual and electronic media, and making good TV entertainment out of it all will no doubt be important to fighting any future war.

Public communication may well move in the direction of more black propaganda. The government’s Iraq war deceptions have largely succeeded. Months after the war’s end, with Weapons of Mass Destruction still undiscovered and Saddam’s link to Osama bin Laden still unproved, a growing chorus of commentators were willing to call attention to the government’s many deceptions. Carlton Spitzer, public relations counselor and former chief of public information for the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, deplored the government’s reckless disregard of the truth. He compared the government’s performance in the Iraq war with Soviet “obscuration and duplicity” in the Cold War, referring to Jean Kirkpatrick’s analysis of Soviet propaganda in her 1963 book, The Strategy of Deception. But the trend toward deception is likely to continue, since the current administration succeeded to such a large extent with its own electorate.

As long as there is a semblance of a free press, or an alternative press such as the Internet, to report the facts of war and point out the deceptions, and as long as there is freedom to have public opposition, the government will have to keep wars short, at least somewhat “clean,” and to give the impression of at least some transparency, lest the public will to fight withers, as it did in Vietnam. All strategies at the White House and Pentagon seemed designed for that possibility in future wars.

References

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., p. 43.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[17] In May 2003, the BBC broadcast a report saying that the Pentagon’s version of the Jessica Lynch rescue greatly exaggerated the dangers faced by the military. It quoted Iraqi doctors at the hospital that it was not guarded by soldiers, its doors were unlocked, and the staff would “gladly have handed her over . . .” An Associated Press reporter subsequently spoke to more than 20 doctors, nurses, and other workers at the hospital and confirmed the BBC story. See Scheherezade Faramarzi, AP, “Jessica Lynch rescue drama exaggerated, Iraqis say,” Minneapolis Star Tribune, May 29, 2003. The Pentagon in early June issued a statement that it was not retracting its version of the story.
[28] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.